

Vermin and Its Destruction in the Ville of Birchington

by Alfred Walker (1967)

It is very difficult today to think of the Churchwardens having the responsibility of keeping down vermin in the parish, but from 1533 in the time of King Henry VIII until about 1835, this was one of their duties. There are numerous entries in their Account Books recording money paid out for the destruction of vermin. From these entries we not only learn of the amounts of money paid out, but also of the kind of vermin destroyed – some of which are no longer seen in this area, and others very rarely. Some of what was considered vermin years ago are no longer considered as such – in fact some are now preserved and protected.

In 1533 an Act was passed ordering by implication that the Churchwardens were to provide the parish with a net for the destruction of “rooks, crows, and choughs” and that two pence was to be paid for every twelve old crows, rooks or choughs. A chough is a kind of red-legged crow.

In the time of Queen Elizabeth, the Act was renewed and the Wardens were to assess holders of land or title for the destruction of “Noyfull Fowles and Vermin” and to furnish a fund for paying a penny for every three heads of old “Crowes, Chowes, Pyes (magpies), or Rooks”, and a penny for every six young owls, and a penny for every six unbroken eggs. The heads of the animals and eggs of the birds were to be shown to the Wardens and then cut asunder or otherwise destroyed. The Act was renewed in 1572 and in 1597/8. In Birchington and Acol the Churchwardens discharged this duty and quite large sums were paid out for the destruction of the vermin.

The first mention by the Churchwardens of a payment for the killing of vermin is in 1673 – the time of King Charles II, when sixpence was paid for the killing of a “poullcatt”. Over the years a number of “pouldcatts” (or poulcatts, poulcates, powellcats, poulcats), were accounted for, as well as dozens and dozens of sparrows. In one year a total of £15 2s 4½ d was paid out for 1,700 dozen old and young sparrow heads and it was the duty of the Churchwardens to count these heads no matter how distasteful the task. Although in some years a prodigious number of sparrows were destroyed this did not appear to decrease the supply the next year. Hedgehogs were considered vermin and a large number were destroyed and paid for. In some years Birchington appears to have been over run with rats. In 1773 the large number of 4137 rates were killed and 1/2d per head was paid out costing £8 12s 4½d. The large number is not really surprising when it is considered that at this time Birchington and Acol had no drainage or piped water, and all garbage, rubbish etc, was thrown out of the house into the roadway or on to a heap in the garden where rats flourished. No wonder Birchington and Acol occasionally suffered from plague and epidemics.

Foxes, rooks, and “whezells” were also caught and destroyed as were “baggers” (badgers) and “puttises”. A puttis was probably a stoat. Sparrow hawks, kites, & snakes were killed and paid for in the parish. Some of these are no longer seen in the parish or even in Thanet. It appears that no mention is made in the Accounts for killing of foxes, probably because these were hunted by the gentry and so the killing of foxes by ordinary people was forbidden. The Hunt often met in Birchington Square and the Boxing Day Meet in the Square was an event which attracted a large following from all over Thanet and East Kent and was photographed in 1903 and 1905.